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Testimony on UCONN Affordability

By Senator Toni Boucher

October 3, 2013

Chairman Kissel, Chairman Mushinsky, Ranking Member Fonfara, Ranking Member Carpino, and other distinguished members of the Program Review and Investigations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the affordability of UConn and the impact of tuition increases on Connecticut's students and families.

Over the past few years, UCONN students have been faced with a steady increase in cost of their college education. With tuition and fees now exceeding \$23,000 a year for in-state students living on campus, and \$116 in new fees that just went into effect at the beginning of this semester, we are in danger of putting quality education out of financial reach for those who need it most.

This year alone, the cost of college degree at UCONN has gone up by almost 11%. A 5.1% increase in mandatory fees approved by the university in February was added onto the latest installment of a four year tuition increase put forward in 2011. With many high school seniors looking for affordable schools and with current UCONN students wondering from year to year how rising costs will affect their ability to complete their degree, it is little wonder that our community colleges are bursting with enrollment. Students will often enroll for two years and then transfer to the Central State University System, despite the fact that UCONN receives a lot of money compared the CSU schools.

Much of the blame for these tuition increases can be assigned to rising labor costs and the state's long history of severely underfunding pension obligations. To offset this underfunding, union and non-union employee will receive a 5 and 3 percent pay raise respectively next year, which will also necessitate increases in required pension contributions. For every \$1000 UCONN expends in salary and wages, it must pay \$547 per employee in fringe benefits. Unlike in other states, this agreement was not negotiated by the university's governing board, but by the Governor's office, effectively tying UCONN's hands.

UCONN students are being punished because of the financial failures of the state and due to labor agreements which effectively exclude UCONN from negotiating the contracts of its own employees. Without the incentive to keep costs down, we will continue to see a rise in tuition and fees that will hurt Connecticut students and their families. With so many of our 18-30 year olds already choosing to pursue opportunities in other states, we should be doing everything possible to provide an affordable higher education for all of our students.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak on this important issue.